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***Carme Riera's Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini and the Web of Ruptures and Unities of the «Action Painting»***  
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# CARME RIERA'S *UNA PRIMAVERA PER A DOMENICO GUARINI* AND THE WEB OF RUPTURES AND UNITIES OF THE "ACTION PAINTING"

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Carme Riera, in her novel *Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini*, establishes a tensional web between order and disorder, unity and disruption to articulate a continuous and contradictory multilayered world that affects the formation of the subject. Fragmentation and rupture in the text promote disorder and uncontrol to represent division and conflict within the subject and the world. The author destroys the traditional sequential order by juxtaposing the life of the protagonist, Clara, with two independent stories: Guarini's case and a professorial exegesis of Botticelli's *Primavera*. The text becomes a multitude of fragments where the stories, the repertoire of memories and voices intersect and interact. Nevertheless, order and meaning emerge from disorder and rupture and the non-linear narrative becomes a web in which all fragments are entangled. The two independent stories and the different voices become a metaphor that intertwine with the personal life of Clara in order to engage her in a journey of self-discovery, to redefine the self and to shape a coherent identity. Riera's novel promotes a text where a net of voices, allusions, stories and intertextualities both juxtapose and dissolve in interruptions, gaps and zigzags, much like the infinite strokes and multiple layers of an Action Painting, to create a dialectical tension that vibrates, reverberates and expands in time and space encompassing different historical, cultural and ideological currents.

Harold Rosenberg, referring to Action Painting, said that the canvas began to appear "as an arena in which to act - rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (48). Form is irrelevant and is replaced by the final product, i.e., by what is revealed in the event, and this event captures the world and the mind's emotional energy. Dramatic gestures, substantial pourings, brushmarks and drippings register events and record the act of creation. The painting becomes a battlefield where fragmentation and disorder build up through a web of multiple layers of painting, variations of viscosities, bold and unpredictable brush strokes and, ultimately, originate a textural surface of discontinuities, gaps and

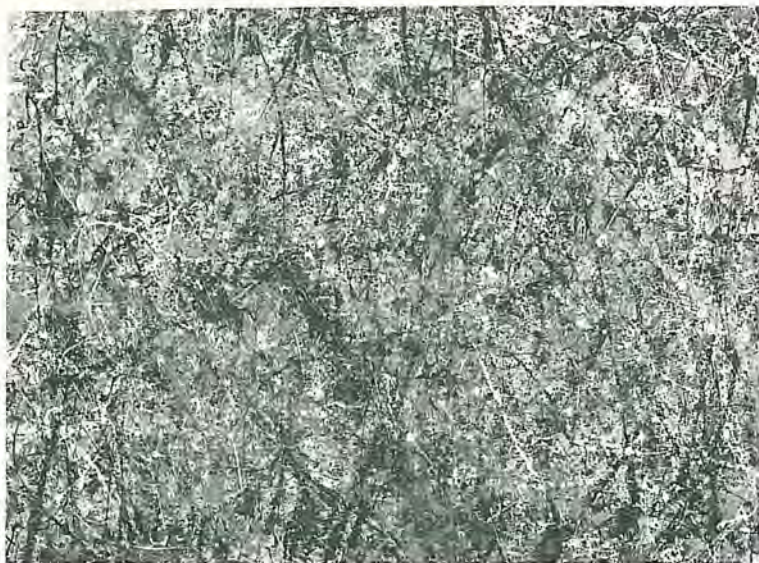


Fig. 1. *Lavender Mist: Number 1, 1950, 1950*. Oil, enamel and aluminium paint on canvas, 87 in. x 9 ft. 10 in. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund. In Elisabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock*. New York: Abbeville P, 1983 (81).

zigzags. For example, in Jackson Pollock's painting, *Lavender Mist: Number 1* (fig. 1), the dense entangling web emanating from the flowing circuit of the image generates disunity, uncontrol and rupture. Delicate silvery gray, white and black lines superposed and intermixed with pale pinks, cinnamons, blue-green and lavender create a dynamic painted surface of non-homogenous textures. Furthermore, the interwoven multiple layers, together with the juxtaposition of the impasto's variation of thickness or thinness, project a simultaneous net of fragmented forces, similar to events in *Una primavera* where the juxtaposition and interaction of three stories and a multitude of voices create a verbal field of erratic discontinuities and blanks.

The first part of the novel presents the life of Clara, the main character/narrator who goes to Florence to attend Guarini's trial. The second part intertwines passages from Clara's life and articles written by her. These are introduced as an independent story, which interrupts the main one, and deals with the trial and Guarini's life where Clara can set forth and speculate over the motives for Botticelli's painting assault. In the third part of the text and in the epilogue, the trial is not



longer covered, but instead there is an exegesis by a professor about Sandro Botticelli's paintings, *El naixement de Venus* and *El regne de Venus* ("La Primavera"). This emerges as the third story, intermixing and intersecting with thoughts, and voices from the main character's past. The external voices are also present in the two other sections and appear with neither causal nor temporal logic. Furthermore, Riera includes, in the last section, the reproduction of the two Botticelli paintings, making the pictorial text appear both visually and verbally, and reinforcing the professor's explanations (128-129). While the voices are related directly to Clara's life, the professor's explanations add another level of diegesis foreign to the main character's life: an autonomous and specific story inside another independent one, similar to what happens in Guarini's case. There is no direct connection among the three stories which are developed sequentially through disconnected fragments. The juxtaposition of these stories and voices, like the plurality of lines in Pollock's painting and the splashy brushmarks dragged through these wet layers, promote a multiple discontinuous narrative that breaks the flow of the text when going from one moment to another, from one space to another, and from one time to another, even though there exists a sequence in the fragmented verbal and visual text.

This multiplication and fragmentation happen not only in the structure of the novel but also in the narrative voice and in the character's discourse. In the first part, the second part, and the epilogue, the dialogue that Clara establishes with herself between the subjective "I" (jo) and "you" (tu) predominates: "Clara, Clara, estàs gelosa i això és imperdonable... Cal fer un darrer esforç i participar en el tema" (110). The dialogical structure of I/Clara constantly invoking the you/Clara allows the character to submit herself to a verbal reflection where she can express, through a digressive discourse that conjures up strongly suggestive abstractions and stylized images, her concerns and worries:

Criatura esguerrada, papallona rèptil, precipitant-se vers la tenebra, magnetitzada per les ombres, endevinant on la fosca guarda runes de tarda, esquelets de capvespre, capses buides d'insomni. (11)

The diegesis vanishes in the midst of the expansive power of a language, where words accumulate rapidly within a sustained rhythm that halt the temporal flow. The vocabulary melts and is charged with reminiscences in order to materialize the immediate sensorial experience that is produced in the clash of feeling the fetus growing in the maternal womb and the insecurities of a divided self, emphasized by the use of pronouns I/you. The same happens in *Lavender Mist*

where the rhythmic repetitions of fluid lines, dripping paint and thick or thin impasto create a strong textural and irregular surface where the non-hierarchical energy generates a dense and discontinuous entangling web that captures the artist's drama, explains his drives and his pervasive sense of dislocation. Michael Leja states that: "[d]iscontinuous handling is one of the strategies by which Pollock both figures disorder and uncontrol and simultaneously signifies division and conflict within the subject" (280). Furthermore, the chain of signifiers in the novel and the labyrinthine structures constructed by the line expand metaphorically in a visual repertoire or vocabulary of forms where objects disintegrate in a constellation of enigmatic images with non-figurative shapes devoid of referent. In *Una primavera* a harsh darkness that deforms objects, promoted by words like "tenebre", "ombres", "fosca", "tarda", "capvespre" and "insomni" prevails in the text, while in the painting space vibrates and resounds with line, color and light to capture the dynamic fluidity of nature. However, in the visual and verbal text, form is concealed and obscured in a world full of textures where contours and limits disappear and where lines, light, and darkness produce both recognizable figures and abstract forms, flowing in a continuous surface that traps the reader/spectator in an expanding and contracting space, where movement is expressed by forces and counterforces charged with high emotions, feelings and sensations, memories and experiences, wishes and aversions, that capture life itself.<sup>1</sup>

The flowing energy of Pollock's painting and the expanding discourse of Riera's novel produce such an immediate impact on the viewer/reader that it causes him/her to respond as an active participant rather than as a passive observer since they are forced to become aware of "the event." Words such as "web," "labyrinth," and "maze," commonly used by critics to describe Pollock's art become a metaphor that seduce the viewers in a fully three-dimensional space where images, projected into their environment, invite them to move freely in any direction. The spectator is pulled into the labyrinth of lines and through the magical maze of the web where he/she can adopt, as Dore Ashton indicates, the position of a spider deep within its abode: "Il peut aussi, comme une araignée, s'asseoir au cœur du bâti et, à l'arrière du premier plan, demeurer à l'abri à l'intérieur de la grande trame" (77). The viewer is drawn into a chaotic and disturbing spatial event that situates him/her

<sup>1</sup> Robert Motherwell stated that "one of the tasks that modern art set for itself was to find a language that would be closer to the structure of the human mind—a language that could adequately express the complex physical and metaphysical realities that modern science and philosophy made us aware of; that could more adequately reflect the nature of our understanding of how things really are" (Morris, 91)





Fig. 2. *Blue Poles: Number 11*, 1952, 1952. Enamel and aluminium paint with glass on canvas, 83 in. x 16 ft. Australian National Gallery, Canberra. In Elisabeth Frank, *Jackson Pollock*. New York: Abbeville P, 1983 (99).

in the web field of the unconscious. Similarly, in *Una primavera*, the reader is led by Clara's second person pronoun, "you" into the space of her subjectivity. According to Brian McHale, "you" "functions as an invitation to the reader to project himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of you" (224). The text traps the reader within a fictional universe that creates an implicit parallel with Lacan's mirror phase, thus, placing the reader in an ontological space where the I/reader reads the text and sees the other I/Clara as his/her replica and gradually establishing a link between them. Together, they experience the same confusion in Clara's quest to find her position as an independent self and the reader has to agree with the character when she declares: "Tot és confús, obscur..." (65). The dialogical structure and the web create an intersubjectivity that infiltrates and invades the reader/viewer and provokes a confined and collective osmotic experience. This dissolves them into a preverbal flow of a discourse that responds to sensations and they become what Kristeva calls a "subject-in-process" without fixed identity, and in transit to a new self.

If the fragmentation, multiplication and digression do not interrelate, the verbal and visual text would fall into mere chaos. Pollock's unconventional methods of placing the canvas on the floor, of dripping the pigment, of energetic random brushing, of frenzied brushmarks and Riera's multiple and disconnected stories, discourse, and voices are not the product of an illogical haphazard system but rather, exhibit a process of willed action to achieve a disruptive unity that displays the artist/writer's control over materials and forms. For example, in *Blue Poles: Number 11* (fig. 2), the spontaneity and fluidity

of interwoven green-grey, white, yellow, red and white lines balance the powerful tension of the eight rigid dark vertical poles. The artist creates a "tour de force" of controlled composition by making strong contrast of light and dark, straight lines and curves that develop into a structured and repetitive pattern of interconnected but not similar parts. In this "allover" composition, "the spectator's attention tends to be directed to the entire field of energy rather than to any particular mark or set of marks. And although a contrast exists... the dominant effect is one of totality rather than particularity, or an organic whole rather than the sum of individual parts" (Cernuschi, 118). The painting's "organic whole" or totality effect does not allow a visual center of attention, unlike Riera's novel in which Clara becomes the focal point of the narrative that gives coherence to the text.

The Guarini case and the *Primavera* intertext are two independent stories that operate tropologically as a metaphor that interrelates with the personal life of the character and constantly remodels her portrait. Guarini becomes a distorted mirror in which the protagonist can ultimately see her own reflection. When Clara reconstitutes the reasons that lead him to assault the painting, she presents a Guarini that is to her image. He is a man that loves intensely Laura, a "boig per amor" that lives "guiat per un amor ideal." His "vida només depèn de Laura" since he gives his all for her ("ho dona tot per Laura"), but "és ella que no el comprèn" (101-2). His obsession for Laura, that leads him to live only for her, is similar to the amorous relation that Clara establishes with Enric. It is a relation which is based, as she indicates, on "la meua veneració envers la seva persona" and flows into the annihilation of the self, "vaig deixar de ser Isabel Clara Alabern per a convertir-me en la companya d'Enric Rabassa, aquesta noia que viu amb ell, l'amant o fins i tot l'amigueta del líder" (164-65). The two parallel stories merge when Clara says: "Domenico Guarini c'est moi..." (104). Clara searches in her reflection of Guarini for a confirmation of her own identity and tries to hide her own fears and anxieties behind his story. Like the Narcissus myth, this mirror image relationship does not go anywhere and as Albert states, "el món es redueix als límits del seu mirall, incapaç de reflectir-hi una altra cosa que no sigui la seva imatge" (104). In a world projected and reduced to the confines of Clara's own image, there cannot exist change or growth since she places herself in a safe, fixed position where she is unable to distinguish between "I" and the other (since the other/Guarini's life is a projection of her own image). Furthermore, Clara's/Guarini's way of acting perpetuates "els esquemes més conservadors de l'enamorament burgès: sentit de la propietat, afany de perpetuar-la, paternalisme, domini absolut, pèrdua de la llibertat, egoisme..." (103). The character places herself in



conventionally delimited positions within an asymmetrical structure of heterosexual relations.

As the Guarini case becomes a deformed mirror image in which the character sees herself, the explanations by the professor are not a mere accumulation of external references; rather they intertwine with Clara's past and present. There is a play between text and intertext that brings back childhood voices and memories:

"... L'amor és considerat, a més, una experiència penosa i perillosa que porta la ment a un estat d'inconsciència i d'infantilisme, segons podem trobar en escrits mitogràfics de la baixa antiguitat..." No me'n penedesc. Mai no em penediré d'haver estimat Enric (165).

After this statement, Clara reflects on her relationship of codependency with Enric and the disintegration of this dependence allows her to analyze the reasons for her behavior: "Enric em decebé... Després vaig quedar-me embarassada i Enric... Voldria que no fos solament un sentiment de rebel·lia el que m'indueix, tot sovint, a tenir el meu fill" (166).<sup>2</sup> Botticelli's *Primavera* provokes Clara to recreate events of her past where she diffuses herself through shattering mirrors and intermirroring phases thereby embarking in a journey of self-discovery. Pollock's paintings are also like Narcissus's pool, a distorting mirror, where the inner world of "memories arrested in space, human needs and motives, [and] acceptance"<sup>3</sup> projects the turbulent movements of the unconscious in the search of a unified self-image. The painting becomes a "field in which viewers identify their core of selfhood and see enacted its complex states and psychological operations" (Leja, 329). The individual experience of the unconscious portrayed in Pollock's art is shaped by cultural, historical and sociological determinants. His paintings are a reconstruction of such ideologies that mold the ego.

The self uses mirror-effects and self-reflection to reshape itself making its way into the Lacanian symbolic order through discourse and cultural exchange. When a child, between 6 and 18 months, sees for the first time his/her image reflected in a mirror, he/she perceives another human being with whom he/she identifies. During this mirror stage, the child begins to recognize him/herself as a separate entity of the exterior world, and begins to establish a series of equivalencies between persons and objects that surround him/her. At this time, the

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Ordóñez analyses in detail how the intertext and Clara's life interrelate, concluding: "the interplay between a professorial exegesis of '*Primavera*' and memories of Clara's past further serves to underscore the vexing and confining aspects for today's woman of both Renaissance mythology and traditional Spanish ideology" (131-32).

<sup>3</sup> This is a statement that Pollock made of his work, cited by April Kingsley in *The Turning Point*.



child establishes contact with language, and enters into the symbolic order, exiling the imaginary order that corresponds to the maternal space. Therefore, the self is subordinated to pre-established asymmetrical social structures stemming from an authoritative patriarchal order that is imposed at childhood by the acquisition of language. As Nancy Chodorow indicates, family is the institution that transmits these structures to the child as in the case of Clara when her mother tells her:<sup>4</sup>

Un homo te pot enganyar, t'estima encara que ho faci. Una dona, no, si no és una perduda. Noltros hem vengut al món per a sofrir i agontar. Déu nostro senyor ho volgué així: pariràs amb dolor, obeiràs el teu homo... Les dones som diferents, no cal dir-ho. No tenim necessitat de plaer com els homes. Jo he fet ús del matrimoni per a tenir fills. (134-35)

És a ell a qui toca de sortir a guanyar els doblers i a lluitar fora casa, no a noltros. Desenganya't, no servim per aquests negocis. Què et creus? Una dona pot influir i molt sobre un homo per a dur-lo pel bon camí, per a fer-lo millor, més religiós, per a ajudar-lo a triomfar. Tot homo que triomfa a la vida té a darrera una dona que l'ajuda a triomfar, no ho dubtis. Ja ho crec que pens que és superior! (136)

The women's body becomes a sexual object and an object of procreation within a cultural frame of dependency and of passivity at the expense of independence and autonomy. Clara is raised by a patriarchal society that promotes, reproduces and maintains sexual differences, privileging man over women and shaping the character's idea of what a woman should be.

Clara's response to her upbringing depends on the social interactive process and how she answers to the whims of the adults that formed her identity, but, as Paul Smith explains in *Discerning the Subject*, the subject "is not simply the actor who follows ideological scripts, but is also an agent who reads them in order to insert him/herself into them –or not" (xxxv). The processes by which the self constitute her/himself is never monolithic because it adopts "multifarious subjects positions" that allow him/her the possibility either to follow or to reject the ideological scripts. Furthermore, within the self there exists a mass of undefined energies and sensations without limits, the repressed Lacanian imaginary order that corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the child is part of the mother. This primary symbiotic union with the mother, according to Lacan, gives way to the unconscious that goes beyond linguistic

<sup>4</sup> Chodorow explains: "personalities and behaviour of those who happen to interact with a child, is also socially patterned according to the family structure and prevalent psychological modes of a society" (50).

structures and escapes cultural restrictions. Consequently, the subject remains constituted by language and social values, and by an unconscious, pre-verbal energy, that language can not accommodate (Kristeva calls these energies unassimilated within linguistic structures 'semiotic'). Clara seems to be divided between a role-defined social self and an undercurrent of amorphous energy that assails the social definition of identity. With Enric, she becomes a submissive and passive woman, mother and companion, shaping herself to conform to the contours of social structures and cultural scripts. The character states: "[s]empre he procurat viure d'acord amb algú, pensant en algú. De vegades quan em mir al mirall, rera meu apareix un rostre que em somriu o posa cara seriosa segons el meu capteniment..." (52). Clara's self disappears while searching for others' recognition, by appropriating different masks and roles that comply with social expectations and perpetuate codependency and alienation. On the other hand, she recognizes the ideological warps that imprison her and vigorously writes articles against gender constraints:

Estàs plena de contradiccions, tu! Malgrat que gairebé sempre portes pantalons i presumeixes d'anar molt ben mal vestida, admires secretament les modes i els vestits lluits per les models a les desfilades d'alta costura. És clar que immediatament les compadeixes i ets capaç d'escriure furibundíssims articles contra la dona-objecte, la comercialització del cos femení, la seva exhibició a les passarel·les entre els focus que accentuen encara més la marginació femenina. (33).

Moreover, the interlocutive act that Clara establishes with herself through a specular doubling, in which I/Clara speaks constantly to you/Clara, works toward a recognition of the ideological scripts that distort her own experience. This awareness leads her to confront the warped power structures, to understand herself and to break with the dependency created with the social/other.

Both Clara's interlocutive act and multiple self-reflections (provoked by the professorial exegesis) will allow her to re-interpret the past and will permit her to resist and reject old structures of codependency. Shifting from image to image, from event to event, she continues molding and re-molding her own limits until she discovers and reconstructs the real self: "Tremola la teva pròpia imatge -totes les versions de tu mateixa, totes les possibilitats del teu ésser, totes les màscares-, desapareix, es recompon, calidoscòpia, al fons d'aquest mirall anomenat *La Primavera*" (180). On the other hand, Pollock's artistic creation is, as Riera's novel, an interplay of contradictory ideas, conflicts, discourses and ideologies in a dialogic interchange between the inner and outer world in which the artist sees himself reverberate and finds his own identity in the creative act. As Pollock said: "Painting



is self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is" (Rodman, 82). The artist's internal world, echoed in the visual field, and Clara's different subject positions fulfill an hermeneutical function of re-elaboration and re-definition of the self; which in the case of Clara becomes an efficient tool that permits her to break the symbiotic fusion with the social "other" and to affirm: "No cal que t'esforcis a buscar assentiment o complicitat en cap rostre, un gest d'ànim, un signe encoratjador. Rera els vidres del quiròfan no hi ha ningú: ni la teva mare, ni Enric, ni Maria, ni tan sols l'ombra d'Albert. Ningú. Però ningú no et fa falta, no els necessites. Ets sola" (189-190). The mirror of the social/other, that reflects a deformed image of her own, breaks when she renounces a symbiosis, socially placed, in favor of differentiation. Furthermore, when Clara accepts the responsibility of raising her child alone, she is rejecting the family structure constituted by the patriarchal society, a society that traditionally perpetuates concepts of subordination, submission and dissolution of the self.

Riera's text cultivates a texture of subjectivity where the juxtaposition of several stories (Clara, Guarini and the explanation of Botticelli's painting) and the multitude of episodes, incidents and voices, which embrace not only the web of intertextualities but also clichés and everyday situations, intertwine in a multiple and conflictive discourse. In the crossroads of these limits the subject and object dissolve, as in the infinite number of brush strokes, tightly woven layers and different colored lines of an Action Painting, creating a dialectical tension that vibrates, reverberates and expand in space. Riera wrote about her novel:

Yo busco una estructura abierta, episódica, incluyendo crónicas de periódico, cartas, cuentos dentro de la novela: una acumulación de elementos destrabados que llega un punto en que se cierran, obteniéndose una doble estructura: la lineal, destrabada de simple yuxtaposición, y el conjunto global que resulta conseguir trabar, cerrando, esos elementos dispares. Se traban en el momento en que el lector construye relaciones entre todos ellos, entonces se cierra el círculo de la obra abierta y esto sucede cuando el autor consigue que unos reverberen sobre otros y que el lector contribuya, añadiendo su iridiscencia propia a esa reverberación. (Racionero, 16)

*Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini* and Pollock's visual field pull the reader/viewer into a dynamic, circular and fluid circuit that underpins and discloses Western ideological discourses. With the texts' multilayered threads and its spatial reverberation the centralist tendency to establish limits between form and content, reality and fiction, author and reader, art and antiart vanishes.



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